

Meaningful UN Security Council Reform Requires Aligning Principles and Practices

Criticism of the United Nations Security Council and calls for reform have long persisted, and have become more urgent in recent years. However, deeply entrenched interests, geopolitical rivalries, and institutional inertia – rooted in colonial-era hierarchies and power asymmetries – present significant obstacles. This In Focus calls for a commitment to reaffirming the core UN principles as an essential step in the reform process, and emphasises that any outcome short of abolishing the P5’s permanent membership and veto power would be misaligned with the UN’s core animating values.

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Established in 1945 to support international peace and security and to coordinate the action of states, the United Nations (UN) has enjoyed significant success as a global forum, delivering life-saving assistance to millions affected by natural disasters, diseases, and conflict; establishing politically influential norms through the facilitation of [disarmament](#) and [environmental agreements](#); and passing quintessential resolutions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Still, the UN is in the midst of a reckoning. Sharp criticisms have been directed at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in particular for its failure to prevent conflicts, inadequate implementation of meaningful peacekeeping measures, and inability to take action on crises (with those in Ukraine, Palestine and Sudan being only the most recent examples). The UNSC has also been faulted for its governance practices – anachronistic hierarchical structures (permanent members) and non-democratic decision-making (veto powers) benefitting its five founding members (the so-called P5: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) – that are at odds with the UN Charter’s principles of [“equal rights”](#) and [“sovereign equality”](#), and marginalise Global South countries.

Urgency for change

These criticisms are not new. [Calls for reform](#) of the UNSC have persisted for decades without much success. However, in February 2023, discussions among UN member states and groups (termed the [“Intergovernmental Negotiations”](#) or IGN)

significantly increased transparency and accountability by recording and posting IGN sessions online and including a repository of member statements on a dedicated UN website. In 2024, the [Pact for the Future](#) – a globally negotiated pledge – contained a commitment to reform the UNSC as an essential element of efforts to reinvigorate a “just, democratic, equitable, and representative” multilateral system. [Heads of state and government officials](#) from around the world, including the P5, [analysts and academics](#), and influential groups (e.g. [The Elders](#)), have been lending their voices to the reform discussion, strongly advocating for changing the UNSC’s composition and governance structures.

These actions demonstrate that some progress is being made. There appears to be a mounting [sense of urgency](#) for change, a critical psychological component that motivates individuals and organisations to move beyond the status quo and toward a new and very different future. This urgency is driven by external factors (e.g. shifting geopolitical landscape, [polycrisis challenges](#), and worldwide demands for [eliminating the legacy structures of imperialism](#)) and internal UN dynamics (e.g. performance deficits, inefficient processes, and inadequate systems and management practices).

However, ambivalence about reform and [false readiness](#) (i.e. negotiating with no intention of reaching an agreement) are also evident. If a change is perceived as a threat, risk aversion, fear, and resistance may result. This means [perceived losses](#)

are more painful than equivalent gains are pleasurable, and smaller, certain gains are preferred over larger, uncertain ones. This makes reform more difficult, constructive engagement less likely, and the maintenance of a flawed system the preferred course of action over uncertain new structures that could shift power dynamics and identities. Indeed, the key reform issues (equitable representation through the expansion of permanent and non-permanent seats and modified use of the veto) have been sticking points in the IGN sessions, with proposals appearing more performative than substantive. Therefore, according to change theorists, the UNSC could be characterised as being in the “[unfreezing](#)” or “[pre-contemplation](#)” stage of change (i.e. experiencing pressure to change in an [open system](#), but not yet committed to taking action).

Aligning principles and practice

The “[Co-Chairs Revised Elements Paper on Convergences and Divergences](#)”, which addresses five clusters of UNSC reforms and specific incremental changes supported by the P5, shows promise. However, none of these proposals addresses the fundamental shifts that need to occur for the UNSC to become truly effective and to restore its legitimacy. Alignment between values that animate an organisation’s existence and the practices and policies it enacts has [long been understood as a key contributor to positive reputation, legitimacy, cooperation, and trust](#). As a [values-salient institution](#) built on collective hope for global peace, misalignment is even more consequential for the UN, because it undermines the organisation’s integrity and erodes public trust in multilateralism more broadly.

The UN’s [espoused theories](#) (articulated beliefs, values or principles) and the UNSC’s theories-in-use (enacted values evident in its structures, systems and actions) currently conflict. The principles of equal rights (i.e. equal access to the UN’s organs) and sovereign equality (i.e. that a state has value regardless of its size of population or territory and irrespective of its economic or military power) are core values espoused in the UN Charter. By failing to give up their permanent status and veto powers (thus upholding colonial power dynamics), the P5 are manifesting enacted values that are at odds with the UN’s core articulated values. Since organisational legitimacy rests on [perceived procedural justice](#) (i.e. fairness in the decision-making process), if the P5 embrace essential reforms that align with the UN’s core values and fully reject antiquated power structures

in the UNSC, realignment can begin the self-reinforcing [virtuous cycle](#) that builds legitimacy, adaptive capacity, and flexibility and – ultimately – helps to fully realise the UN’s vision.

Permanency and the veto

At the formation of the UN in 1945, the P5 countries predicated their participation on their own permanency and veto rights. These privileges – although inequitable and based on [colonial legacies](#) – were foundational elements without which the UN would not have come into existence. But at the current point in the UN’s evolution, these [structures no longer serve a legitimate purpose](#). It is true that the transition from hegemony to multipolarity offers uncertainties for major powers: any reforms, even ones less radical than the abolition of the current structure, will dilute the P5’s power. But organisational theory can offer some solace in this regard. If the P5 cedes power, they will actually gain power; in other words, by giving up permanency and the veto, they will acquire different types of influence. For example, according to [social exchange theory](#), [relational capital](#) will translate into greater long-term influence. These changes would also foster a greater sense of shared ownership and empowerment for all the UN member states, which would positively influence [collective efficacy](#) and thus benefit international peace and security. In short, a less dominant role in a more effective organisation could produce greater utility for the P5 and would instil greater equality, confidence, and credibility in the UNSC.

Geopolitical considerations

On the one hand, this analysis may seem unrealistic. Power rivalries among P5 nations and regional power competitions create competing interests that make even minimal reforms difficult to secure. Moreover, the United States’ disengagement from international cooperation (as evidenced by its recent withdrawal from several [multilateral agreements](#) and [organisations](#)) suggests that UNSC reform efforts will face significant challenges. At best, progress may be slowed due to lack of US involvement; at worst, the Trump administration may actively thwart attempts at reform, considering any change a diminishment of the P5’s power and privileges.

On the other hand, global power shifts are already under way. Over the last two decades, [middle powers](#) (e.g. India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Indonesia) and blocs (e.g. the [BRICS](#), [EU](#), [ASEAN](#) and the [AU](#)) have experienced increased economic and

political agency, inspiring predictions that the world is on the precipice of [great power shifts](#). The UN is also adapting to the new geopolitical realities, with member states attempting to assert their power. For example, the [UN General Assembly recently passed a resolution](#) requiring a debate whenever the veto is used in the UNSC. Zartman argues that a situation is ripe for change when “[the upper hand slips and the lower hand rises](#)”. Despite the geopolitical challenges, the lower hand is rising, the P5’s dominance is waning and momentum for reform is building.

Conclusion

Future IGN sessions should prioritise reaffirming the UN’s core values as an essential first step in the reform process. This [small win](#) could produce a [positive feedback loop](#), engendering confidence in the feasibility of meaningful change. In addition, grounding reform efforts in these foundational UN principles would provide a clear framework for evaluating proposals, ultimately revealing that any outcome short of abolishing permanent membership and P5 veto power would continue the asymmetric power dynamics at odds with the UN’s mandate. The P5 face a choice: to support the alignment of principles and practice and abolish the veto and permanency, or maintain outdated structures that jeopardise global security by undermining the very essence of the UN.